Instructional Communication as a Core Service Competency: A Call for Curricular Change in Professional Library Education

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The promise of libraries to educate the citizenry has long been a purpose of the library as an institution. Instruction occurs in public, academic, and special libraries and is manifested in many ways beyond the traditional classroom environment. This article suggests that instruction is a professional competency intrinsically linked to enhancing service quality and organizational effectiveness. While the merits of library instruction as an effective tool have long been debated in the literature, the emphasis has been on technical needs rather than service issues. A current concern for the acquisition of critical thinking and other information literacy skills is changing the nature of such a debate. Because the value of instruction is re-emerging as both a conceptual and practical skill for library professionals, it is increasingly necessary to provide adequate training and education to librarians. The most suitable place for such an activity is during the course of formal library science education.

INTRODUCTION

> Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppression of the body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.
>
> —Thomas Jefferson to P.S. DuPont de Nemours (cited in Cole, 1995, p. 82)

Thomas Jefferson held a firm belief in the power of libraries to educate and to develop an informed citizenry. His idea for the construction of a national library sent a powerful message to a young nation that democracy could only be fueled by a willingness of the leaders of the nation, as well as of every citizen, to gain the knowledge necessary to make fair and just decisions. In fact, one of the principles cited by Jefferson as fundamental to good government was "the diffusion of information and arraignment of all abuses at the bar of public reason" (U.S. Congress, 1965, p. 16). Some years later, libraries became community centered, serving to complement free public education:

> [T]he educational revolution of the second quarter of the nineteenth century led by Horace Mann and Henry Barnard, which resulted in the beginning of our American system of free public education, provided a strong stimulus to the public library idea. (Gates, 1990, p. 71)

The earliest libraries in the United States were formed to service various societal constituencies through education. This continues to be the case in public, academic, school, and special libraries everywhere. This article demonstrates the need to recognize the concept of service through education as a core competency in today's libraries. In addition, it is suggested that instructional communication—teaching librarians to teach—is an area of study that deserves to be placed primarily in the context of professional education rather than as a training responsibility of specific library organizations.

SERVICE THROUGH EDUCATION: A CORE COMPETENCY

Improving the instructional capabilities of librarians is a primary method of providing quality and enhancing overall service to library patrons. The information industry is ever expanding in the "Information Age" and libraries now face competition from private companies realizing the potential for information to replace land, labor, and machines (Bass, 1994). This information landscape requires human resources that can apply knowledge skills in a heavily automated, growth-centered

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service culture. The social mission of public libraries, the support mission of special libraries, and the educational mission of academic libraries have long been committed to client-centered service philosophies, and all are well positioned to develop service capabilities that can provide them with an industry advantage.

Hagan (1996) defines a core competence organization as one that can offer "a unique package of capabilities distinguished by their centrality to customer value, their resistance to imitation, and their ability to extend to new business applications" (p. 152). These capabilities are built upon skills and technologies that provide an organization with the ability to best serve their constituency. Organizational responsibilities in establishing core competencies are job design, staffing and recruitment, training and development, and appropriate reward systems. The ability to find the right person with the right skills to perform the work that the organization needs in order to achieve its goals is highly dependent on what the organization does for its employees. Libraries and information centers fit well into the notion of the core competence organization and these institutions could benefit from a thorough assessment of their responsibilities to staff and clients.

However, we must also keep in mind that a theoretical knowledge of professional concepts is nurtured through formal education, and it is through this system that instructional skills can and should be developed. Instructional skills are some of the most generalizable and adaptable skills available to knowledge workers and they provide library organizations with the ability to develop and implement products and services that are unique to an organization. Instructional skills are used in combination with personal knowledge to create ideas for action. If we assume that a "good idea" has both intellectual and potential monetary benefits (through revenue, customer satisfaction and loyalty, or cost savings), then the general value of a library's instructional resources becomes clear.

Instructional skills should not be thought of simply as resources needed to teach students within the confines of a classroom. Rather, every service point should be seen as an instruction point. This may indeed be a librarian playing the role of instructor in a formal classroom environment, performing traditional group instruction such as teaching students how to perform search strategies or to use specialized library resources. However, instruction is also a way to communicate with patrons at service points, to share ideas in staff meetings, to initiate proposals during executive presentations, to recruit investors and donors at fund-raisers, and to raise awareness of professional issues during business lunches with stakeholders.

A representative dictionary entry for the term "instruct" reflects the need "to communicate knowledge to," to "teach," and to "educate" (Neufeldt & Guralink, 1988). Communication is a key component of this process. Not only is there a basic need to exchange information in a technical sense, it is also necessary to sequence events so as to enhance comprehension (Gagne & Briggs, 1979; Shannon & Weaver, 1963). Instructional skills incorporate both cognitive and affective elements into a knowledge transfer cycle, utilizing delivery and feedback mechanisms to ensure that what one has said has been understood by another and can be retained for an indefinite period of time. Such communicative actions empower librarians by providing them with techniques and methodologies for handling a variety of situations. While no one person can be a natural politician, manager, teacher, public relations specialist, psychologist, and coach, learning to teach can help librarians respond to a whole menu of possible service scenarios. Such adaptability can qualitatively improve professional practices and increase the value of customer interactions. The bottom-line result: a competitive advantage for the organization through service differentiation.

These alternative uses for instructional skills, as well as those that are more traditionally applied, are more necessary in today's libraries than ever before. The library literature frequently features articles discussing the increasing demand for library instruction. As the Information Age produces an expanding technological infrastructure, society is waging a battle with cognitive complexity. As service providers, Reeves (1996) suggests library professionals mediate this complexity by "moving from data and information to knowledge, understanding, and wisdom" (p. xvii).

Librarians are realizing this, and many are adapting their own practices to accommodate this new paradigm. Yet the resources required for such a change are tremendous. In discussing the needs of users in networked information environments, Burke and Millar (1997) acknowledge the array of conceptual skills required for effective performance:

> Library end-users require education and training if they are to make the most effective and productive use of networked and electronic information services. This training goes beyond technical computer literacy, which is also required. Users must be able to analyze and define their information need; be able to identify, and select the best source to use; search

> effectively; evaluate the information retrieved and modify the search if necessary; and eventually be able to obtain and use materials identified in their search.

Several issues discussed by Burke and Millar (1997) are pertinent to the identification of instructional skills as core competencies for libraries and librarians:

- Instructional interventions are directed at end-users and can improve services to those customers;
- Users require a conceptual awareness as much as, if not more than, technical assistance; and,
- Instructional needs are not format-based but knowledge-based, requiring that the librarian communicate abstract concepts such as critical thinking to an individual or group of individuals who may vary in their ability to comprehend abstractions and in their preferred learning styles.

Perhaps the most positive effect from the rush to acquire new technologies in the nation's libraries is that it is forcing library staff to revisit their educational mission. What is being revealed is that, regardless of format or media, there is a generalizable set of instructional needs. These needs go beyond technical aptitude and require a transfer of knowledge, communication of process, feedback and recognition of successful outcomes. Wilson (1996), writing on the changing nature of library services, noted that "students should no longer be expected to master a finite set of skills, but rather learn how to learn so that learning becomes a lifelong process" (p. 6). This is true in young students as well as in adult learners, particularly as the development of the "learning organization" and technological innovations promise to bring continual changes in the skills expected of current and future members of the labor market. In a similar vein, Gibson (1992) notes that "information literacy skills . . . are very similar to those problem-solving, decision-making, and self-teaching abilities identified as important by management and training consultants for the workplace in the global economy" (p. 102).

In addition to serving as a tool to address user-driven service needs, instructional delivery has been recognized as important by libraries and professional associations. For example, one of the professional expectations endorsed by the Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians (1996) is that the librarian "provides excellent instruction and support for library and information service users" (p. 1.4). This statement by what is arguably the most client-centered arm of librarianship, clearly lends credence to the argument that every service point is an instruction point. Similar views, however, can be found throughout the profession. The Association of College and Research Libraries has stated in their Guidelines (1996), "instruction programming is an essential and fundamental educational service." A research study of academic library administrators by Avery and Ketchner (1996) shows that instruction is considered to be a desirable skill by employers and that the ownership of such skills is relevant in hiring decisions. Bessler (1994) suggests library instruction is an element to be included in a "philosophy of service" or library mission statement. Berring (1993) writes that librarians must be instructors as they are "the people who understand how information works, how it fits together" (p. 112).

In order to differentiate service through the use of instructional interaction, delivery must be consistent and effective. To fulfill these requirements, librarians must fully understand the complexities of the instructional communication process. Cottam (1989) asserts, "if we wish to improve our work as teachers in a BI program, we must actively confront teaching theory and practice" (p. 5). Whether within the context of a BI program or in the course of alternative services, librarians must be able to communicate well, manage people and environments, and develop coherent, achievable goals and objectives. They must be able to assess the needs of their users, determine their levels of skill and aptitude, and continually monitor the quality of the service interaction. Perhaps most importantly, librarians must be able to provide information in such a way that patrons receive accurate and reliable information that is eminently usable to them. If these capabilities are present in professional library staff, the core competency organization can be assured of success.

INSTRUCTIONAL COMPETENCIES AND THE LIBRARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Service to academic, public, special, and school libraries can be enhanced with a library staff possessing knowledge of instructional theory and practice. Organizations can benefit by having service-oriented, problem solving, information-sharing librarians. So why has library instruction been virtually ignored in professional library education?

In a survey of library instruction, Kirk (1995) suggests that although library instruction skills or experience is requested in 75% of academic reference positions,

library education has not been a priority for a number of reasons:

1. Competing demands for expanded content of professional education for librarianship;
2. Lack of expertise among library school faculty;
3. Perception of a lack of demand in the overall context of librarianship;
4. Previous bad experience with outmoded bibliography courses;
5. Issues of ownership in higher education (e.g., courses in pedagogy);
6. Basic philosophy of professional education (e.g., the perception that instruction is technique rather than theoretical in nature); and,
7. Unwillingness by library schools to recognize the importance of the teaching role. (p. 16)

While each of these factors raises important issues, the last item on the list is of particular concern when considering the increasing demand for such skills in the professional sphere. Patterson (1987) proposes the following rationale for library educators' lack of emphasis on the teaching role:

> The generally held assumption is that because the faculty member holds the master's or doctoral degree, the person is qualified and/or otherwise prepared to teach in a college or university. Unfortunately, this is not the situation. This was recently pointed out by Deanna B. Marcum, vice-president of the Council on Library Resources, who, in commenting upon the opinions of reviewers of a grant proposal observed, 'All reviewers pointed out that faculty of universities are not, for the most part, trained as teachers. (p. 4)

Teaching librarians to teach has traditionally been accomplished through training and development opportunities within institutions and through regional and professional associations. The results of mentoring, workshops, and pre-conferences, while valuable, have not proven to be adequate replacements for formal education because they tend to treat instructional delivery as a technique rather than a comprehensive, systematic, and highly conceptual form of communication. Simply utilizing instructional methods cannot be successful until library instructors commit to learning how to be good teachers and good communicators. According to Jones (1986), "library school students need to understand this educational perspective and incorporate it into their attitude of professional integrity" (p. 9).

Advocating and supporting the internalization of instructional skills as a vital addition to the skill sets of practicing librarians belongs to library and information science programs in higher education. McInnis (1995) writes, "the difference between training and education is that training shapes a person's mind and body to perform certain tasks, but education helps shape and transform attitudes and values" (p. 145). Also critical of the role of training programs and the need for higher education to take a leading role in the teaching of instructional skills is Hogan (1980), who stated:

> Mistaken attitudes, unevenness of continuing education opportunities, inability to impart uniform skills or a commonality of understanding, and the twin dilemmas of level and timing could all be addressed by the incorporation of bibliographic instruction into library schools. Library school administrators believe they are adequately addressing the topic of bibliographic education either by the sponsorship of continuing education programs on the topic or by regular mention of the movement in their standard courses, but the evidence suggests that their efforts are not effective. (p. 122)

More recent evidence backs up this claim. Affleck's (1996) study examining causes of burnout among bibliographic instruction librarians found that subjects felt that their M.L.S. degree simply had not prepared them for a teaching role.

Instructional communication must be integrated into the educational-professional cycle to be a service advantage. Librarians must be able to apply teaching skills to every aspect of their jobs, whether they are public service, technical service, or administrative positions. To be able to teach is to be able to motivate others and to enhance their willingness to learn. Good teaching implies that one can disseminate appropriate information to those who need it at a level that matches their skills and current knowledge while making a contribution to their intellectual growth. Instruction requires that the librarian lead the user to an answer through communication of the process used to derive it. It requires that learners leave a service encounter with a higher level of awareness than when they arrived. Instruction is not an end; it is a means for educating through service.

White (1991) raises questions about instruction and service that have since been circulating throughout the profession since his critical examination of library instruction:

> Do we teach students not just what they can do on their own, but also what a professionally staffed information process can do for them . . . do we teach bibliographic instruction as an end in itself, or simply as a beginning that opens the eyes of the student to the professional interactions possible in libraries? (pp. 200-201)

These are questions that must be answered if instruction is to be broadly supported as a curricular offering in library education. Why, as White seems to suggest, should professional educators teach skills that, in essence, erode the knowledge and authority that librarians hold over the information process? To teach students to be self-sufficient is to provide them with trade secrets, to transfer control of the research process to the individual, and to further degrade the status of librarians.

Instruction, according to White (1991), does not belong in the curriculum because it is neither in their professional interest nor in the best interest of the learner. Considered in its narrower, more traditional view, instruction may be seen as a way to save a librarian's time and effort by meeting more students in a classroom. Critics claim this prevents students from experiencing the library and applying the skills they learn in an appropriate context. However, these fears are based on a view of instruction as an end rather than the means to improved service interactions. In using instructional communication to gain a service advantage, it is to our benefit that "instruction does not turn students loose, it bonds you to them for life" (p. 201).

In the for-profit service sector, such action is referred to as "relationship marketing" and is based on the premise that it costs approximately five times more to gain a new customer than to keep a current one (Levine, 1993). While libraries may or may not consider such a cost factor to be relevant, it remains that relationship marketing is another effective method to add value to the learning process. To fully initiate a service through education model, formal structures must be implemented to adhere the "bonding agent," instructional communication, to the librarian's service philosophy.

Instruction simply has not been a competency seen as valuable in any consistent manner among graduate library science programs. In survey research by Mandernack (1990) of 112 subjects on the education and training needs of bibliographic instruction librarians, 60% indicated some knowledge of instruction or learning theory; however, only 16 respondents gained this knowledge through formal library science education, and all but one of these respondents earned their M.L.S more than 10 years prior to the study. Furthermore, "even with the increase of BI responsibilities among librarians in all service areas, no recent graduates have incorporated such background knowledge directly with their library science program" (p. 197).

A recent study of library and information science competencies by Buttlar and Du Mont (1996) concludes that instruction appears as a needed competency only in the school library environment. Initially, this seems to be a disturbing result. In actuality, however, instructional skills appear to be desired by every type of library. The explicit call for bibliographic instruction skills by school libraries in the study may simply reflect the school librarian's place in the educational system. The knowledge and awareness of instructional techniques validates school media specialists, providing them with the teaching credential they need to achieve a sense of professional equity with the faculty they support. Advocacy of "instruction," then, is a very important part of their identity.

The Buttlar and Du Mont study would suggest that other types of libraries do not value instruction. Upon analysis, this is misleading because competencies needed by these other libraries are based on a different set of organizational values. In short, similar needs are described through the use of different labels. These libraries require a more precise distribution of competencies such as a knowledge of sources, the ability to conduct appropriate reference interviews, the ability to communicate effectively, the ability to apply critical thinking skills, the ability to apply effective human relations skills, the utilization of oral communication skills to make presentations, and the ability to select and evaluate print materials. Subjects of the study overwhelmingly chose communication and human-centered skills over technical and functional skills as those competencies most desired in professionals. Interpersonal skills, requisite for quality service, is a universal need in the library profession.

This can be compared to an earlier study of professional competencies by Buttlar and Du Mont (1989). This study demonstrated a demand for bibliographic instruction by academic, school, and public libraries as evidenced by its ranking in each case as one of the five most highly rated competencies. In all libraries, with the exception of school libraries, interpersonal skills and/or group relation skills also appeared as highly desirable competencies. What may have caused librarians in the study seven years later to emphasize particular skills rather than library instruction as a whole? The early 1990's brought new technologies to the forefront of library services and with it a transition in library instruc-

tion from a library use approach to what Kirk (1995) calls the "critical thinking paradigm."

Even as emerging technologies bring new and different educational needs to libraries and their users, opportunities for learning instructional concepts in library education seems to be diminishing. Competencies not explicitly linked to library instruction such as those cited in Buttlar and Du Mont (1996) and the already tenuous status of instruction courses in the curriculum may be contributing to this trend. Despite research showing that, in 1984, 91% of library schools had separate or integrated library instruction courses (Larson & Meltzer, 1987), a study of employer preferences conducted by White and Paris (1985) revealed that library instruction was not included in the list of courses recommended by respondents in academic, public, and special libraries.

It appears the number of library instruction offerings has been declining. Larson and Meltzer (1987) found in their research that 79% of schools responding to their 1986 survey had separate and/or integrated BI courses. An examination of current course catalogs and course offerings of 39 library schools in the United States and Canada found that 25 (62%) currently have courses in which library instruction, instructional design, and/or learning theory are present either as a separate course or integrated within the curriculum.[1]

More research is needed to examine the composition of library instruction in graduate professional education to determine whether instructional skills are currently taught in a manner that will improve the service capabilities of library organizations. A traditional technical approach toward instruction in library science curricula may lead to outcomes where the affective and behavioral aspects of service relationships that benefit library organizations are poorly demonstrated. Traditional programs can be defined as follows:

- Instruction is perceived as a menu of teaching options rather than as a form of professional communication.
- Instruction is perceived as a function rather than a systemic process integral to maintaining organizational performance.
- Instruction is perceived as ineffective and a threat to professional values in the most negative light and as a cost-saving mechanism in the most positive light, but never as a source of professional service differentiation in a competitive information environment.[2]

CONCLUSION

How should library instruction be taught? An investigation of educational and psychological textbooks on instructional theory or a perusal of the *Sourcebook for Bibliographic Instruction* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1993) reveals some of the more complex relationships between teaching and learning. In addition, these sources illustrate the dynamics of the instructional process in an institutional setting. Learning theory, teaching methods, instructional design and planning, interpersonal communication, and management and organizational studies all have a place as components in a library instruction curriculum; these skills in turn transfer to many aspects of library services. What is most important here is that these concepts be taught in the context of each other and the library environment so that each is seen as fundamental to service interactions.

While this article does not suggest a specific curriculum for a bibliographic instruction course, it does suggest that future library professionals will require knowledge of instructional concepts and theories to engage in sustainable service activities in a changing information landscape. Senge (1994) discusses two qualities important to the notion of systems thinking: seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains, and seeing processes of change rather than snapshots. A library instruction course managed properly in graduate library education must demonstrate not only how to teach, it must also assure that students understand why and under what circumstances information professionals engage in teaching activities.

The value of instructional communication skills extends well past traditional classroom teaching and group library literacy programs. Instruction is an integral part of the entire service system in a library organization. Senge (1994) writes that systems thinking "builds to learning to recognize types of 'structures' that recur again and again" (p. 73). Service through education is, indeed, one of those structures. Societies evolve, technologies change, and people come and go, but to this day, librarians serve to inform and inspire the citizenry, to develop the nation's human resources, and to educate minds to make "fair and just decisions." Librarians are communicators of knowledge—we engage in instructional activities in almost everything we do. As the profession develops its formal education programs, it must view these skills as both a competitive advantage and as a curricular necessity.

NOTES

1. This data was collected by attempting to access the web sites of 40 library and information science programs in the United States and Canada. Of the 40, one school's web site was not accessible. Course catalogs, course descriptions, class schedules, and syllabi were examined for evidence of such concepts as library instruction, instructional design, and learning theory. This researcher accepted both separate BI courses and course-integrated BI components. The examination was performed based on data publicly posted and available on June 20, 1997.
2. For a more descriptive discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of library instruction, see Katz (1992, pp. 145-161); see also White (1991).

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